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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [BU](#)  
SUBJECT: BULGARIA: PUSHING PARLIAMENT TO BOOST PUBLIC  
SUPPORT FOR BASES

Classified By: Ambassador Nancy McEldowney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. In an effort to promote greater support for the U.S. military presence in Bulgaria, Ambassador held a meeting and joint press event with the combined leadership of the Defense and Foreign Affairs Committees in Parliament. Noting that sixty percent of the Bulgarian public view the United States positively, but the same percentage view the joint military facilities negatively, the Ambassador called upon the members of parliament to conduct more vigorous public diplomacy to educate the public on the advantages of our defense partnership. While Bulgaria's fractious political parties agree on virtually nothing, the parliamentarians voiced overwhelming consensus on the great value of the defense link with the United States. They committed to intensify their public outreach efforts and clearly demonstrated an intent to profile themselves and their parties as pro-U.S. in the lead-up to next spring's bruising national elections. End Summary.

#### PUBLIC PERCEPTION

¶2. (C) In the Ambassador's meeting with the committee leaders, she shared recent polling data showing that Bulgarians feel positively about the U.S., but are negatively inclined toward the joint training facilities and Bulgarian participation in overseas operations. Yanko Yankov, a Movement of Rights and Freedoms MP representing a district near the Novo Selo Training Area, emphasized that support for the joint facilities and the presence of U.S. troops is higher in the areas near the bases, implying that support is highest among those citizens who are most familiar with the facilities. Any negative responses from the citizens living in these areas, he argued, should not be read as opposition to the facilities, but rather disappointment for not getting as many economic benefits from the bases as quickly as they expected. Other MPs noted that while support for facilities nationwide maybe less than desired, it was only ten years ago that the majority of Bulgarians harbored negative attitudes toward NATO.

¶3. (C) Ruling coalition MPs agreed with the necessity of informing the public about the benefits of the security partnership, and the joint facilities in particular. They noted the President would be attending the October 15 Distinguished Visitors and Media day at Novo Selo Training Area and suggested additional public events in recognition of the arrival of U.S.-donated HMMWVs and the return of the final Bulgarian contingent from Iraq in December. Opposition MPs criticized the ruling coalition for doing too little too late and suggested that the President was only going to witness the joint training under duress and would "rather be

in Sochi than Novo Selo". All agreed that public events centered around our joint security cooperation needed to be part of sustained effort with high-level government support.

#### OVERSEAS OPERATIONS

14. (C) All MPs agreed with the importance of continued Bulgarian participation in Afghanistan. Withdrawal from Iraq (at the recommendation of the GOI) was generally viewed positively, with strong support for a public event to welcome the troops home. The issue of participation in the NTM-I was a technical one, Defense Committee Chairman Angel Naydenov explained, since Bulgaria had the political will to contribute but the General Staff was unsure whether it possessed sufficient expertise to fill NTM-I slots, particularly since most of these required Arabic language skills.

15. (C) NMSS MP Stanimir Ilchev noted that while he strongly supported increasing participation in Afghanistan, Kosovo and elsewhere, it was difficult to explain these increases to his constituents when the newspapers were full of reports on the dire situation of the Bulgarian Air Force and the lack of funds for modernization. Bulgaria has the political will to be a strong partner, he explained, but it desperately needs American assistance through FMF, IMET and other programs to modernize its forces, retain its service members and develop its capabilities. There is, he argued, a direct link between U.S. assistance for modernization and Bulgaria's ability to participate in operations abroad. Opposition MP Assen Agov commented that in addition to supporting operations overseas, Bulgaria and the United States should take a fresh look at

European security in light of recent events in Georgia and take steps to ensure that what happened there could not take place again in Ukraine, Moldova or the Baltics.

16. (C) Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Solomon Passy surprised his ruling coalition colleagues with the suggestion that Bulgarian and other NATO troops be sent to South Korea to replace U.S. troops (who would then be freed for missions in Afghanistan). He had just returned from a visit to both North and South Korea and argued that his plan would help draw South Korea into NATO and would reduce tensions on the peninsula. The other MPs did not seem to take this proposal very seriously, but Passy said he had approached Bulgarian government officials on the plan and received positive responses.

#### GEORGIA AND RUSSIA

17. (C) Both opposition MPs criticized the ruling coalition for taking too soft a stance against Russia for its actions in Georgia. They argued for extending MAP status to Georgia, though perhaps with a longer than normal accession period. Both pushed for the U.S. to take steps to respond to the new security environment in the Black Sea. They argued for an increased U.S. presence at the joint facilities as a "non-aggressive counter-balance" to Russian actions in the region. The ruling party MPs were more circumspect, but all acknowledged concern over Bulgarian energy dependence on Russia and said the EU and U.S. would have to play an important political role in ensuring that alternative pipelines, such as Nabucco, remained feasible projects.

18. (C) Comment: The tone of the Ambassador's first meeting with parliamentary leaders was very positive, with all MPs clearly striving to portray themselves as forward-thinking, pro-U.S. and pro-NATO partners. All were eager to continue cooperation and to burnish their credentials as reliable U.S. partners. While the MPs do not wield great influence over security affairs in their official capacity, they are very well positioned to assist us in spreading our message on the joint facilities to the population. As representatives of their respective parties, their highly cooperative stance indicates that, despite elections on the horizons, both the ruling and opposition parties remain keen to work with us and we should continue to enjoy reliable Bulgarian government

support on our defense and security priorities.  
McElDowney